

SHS 'Academy of Finance' fast track to business world

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SMITHFIELD - The Academy of Finance at Smithfield High School continues to help students make contacts and build relationships with area businesses.

The group, in its eighth year and with 55 members, held its 2nd annual breakfast on Dec. 21. Invited guests included members of the Smithfield School Committee, Smithfield Town Council President Steve Tocco, state Auditor General Ernest Almonte, state Treasurer-elect Frank Caprio Jr., state Sen. John Tassoni, who is also chair of the group's advisory board and the father of an academy alumni.

Addressing the Academy of Finance members at the breakfast, Almonte, auditor general and also the president of the Rhode Island Society of Certified Public Accountants, commended the program, saying "We need to promote financial literacy."

He announced the donation of two lap top computers.

Also speaking at the breakfast, Caprio told the students, "You can't put a price tag on what you'll learn in this finance academy. You'll learn more than most adults know. This should be a state model and a national model."

He further urged, "Don't think anything is out of your grasp, not even Wall Street. Don't be

intimidated."

One participant, Billy Garrison, is a graduate of the class of 2005 and Bryant student. "The internship I had in my junior year is the current job I have at Bryant University," he said of the program. "It helped me get my foot in the door."

The student members meet monthly in the school's media center. It's guided by an advisory board to the academy, made up of community members.

Smithfield High School is one of 12 in the state to offer the program. Students in SHS's program attend one or two specialized courses each semester for two or three years, and a Business 101 course at Bryant

University during senior year. A paid 6- to 8-week internship and personal mentoring is part of the curriculum.

The local academy was started in 1998 by Michael Densmore, who retired in 2002, then handled by Christine (O'Dowd) DiSandro in 2000, who passed it on to Erica Valentine in 2002.

Stephen J. Rocco, co-director of the Academy, stepped up in 2005. "One of the main reasons we do this," said Rocco, "is to build relationships with the business community and create internships for our kids."

Rocco has a goal for the 2007-2008 year of 85 members, or 10 percent of the school's population.

"This is the new wave, a school within a school," said Ann Andrews, business department chair. "We have proven



State treasurer-elect Frank Caprio Jr. chats with Smithfield High School Academy of Finance members Kyle Boyle, class of 2007, Jon Branch, class of 2006 and Sean Murphy, class of 2006, at the 2nd annual breakfast meeting of the Academy of Finance, held on Dec. 21.

Breeze photo by Beth Hurd

results," she continued. "Four of the academy's graduates have been recipients of four year scholarships to Bryant University."

Several recipients attended the breakfast, including John Fogarty, class of 2003, and Andrew Mesale, class of 2005.

Mesale started his own business while a senior at Smithfield High School, recycling ink and toner cartridges. "It's been a good opportunity," he said of the program. "I'm starting to branch out, work with college students."

Students in the academy hear guest speakers and make field trips to local businesses and institutions. They have visited Fidelity and Bryant University, and plan future trips to Smith-Barney and the University of Rhode Island. The group has

also requested an overnight field trip to New York, a pilgrimage they have made for the past two years.

"We've been on the 'Today Show' for the past two years," joked Andrews. "That's a highlight."

Rocco told the group last week he has asked the Smithfield School Committee to create an International Business Academy. He said many of the students study foreign languages and study global issues in other classes. He would also like to purchase a scrolling ticker or flat screen television for the school.

The school has been affiliated with the National Academy Foundation for nine years. The goals of NAF academies, located in 40 states, is to provide students who desire to go directly into the work force with mar-

ketable skills and provide students who plan to continue their education in business at a two or four year college program with a head start. Some of the courses taken as part of the program can count towards college credit.

Local business partners have included Fidelity Investments, Amica Insurance, Winfield-Anderson Funeral Home, Sovereign Bank, Verizon, and Pawtucket Credit Union. The Smithfield tax assessor's office and town clerk's office have also acted as internship providers.

The next meeting of the Academy of Finance will be Jan. 25, at 8:14 a.m. in the media center. New members are welcome, and businesses interested in the program can contact Rocco at 949-2050.